Decoration, Landscape and Other Themes

Willy Pogany's Mural Paintings in the People's House

By Royal Cortissoz

Since the burned-out galleries at the Fine Arts Building could not be restored in time, the usual winter exhibition of the Academy of Design has been abandoned. On the other hand, the spring exhibition will be duly held, opening in March, and it is planned to make this affair one of exceptional significance. It is to be hoped that this does not mean that any emphasis will be placed upon quantity. What is needed is not a combination of the winter and spring exhibitions, but a careful selection from both. The Academy has now a peculiar opportunity. It may not have the huge new building which we hear about just once in so often, but it will have a renovated environment and every reason for making a new start. It would not be a bad idea if the occasion were seized to call for a special effort upon the part of those numerous academicians who, as a rule, are absentees. There are men in this large group whose work would unquestionably strengthen the show. The Architectural League, by the way, will omit its exhibition this season.

Symbolism

The History of the Human Soul in Pictures

Years ago something like a landmark was erected in the history of American mural decoration when the late Robert Blum painted his beautiful frieze for Mendelssohn Hall. And then, as so often happens to landmarks in New York, it was swept away, leaving no wrack behind. Many interesting things have since been developed in our mural painting, but only recently have we witnessed a similar effort to carry out a unified scheme in a similarly small auditorium. The new work appears in the little hall of the People's House, the hall which has just been formally dedicated to Eugene Debs. A room named in his honor might have been expected to get itself decorated by some extreme radical, but Mr. Willy Pogany, whatever his political or sociological opinions may be, has done the work in a manner that, technically speaking, is conservative enough. His modernism is embodied in his ideas rather than in his methods. It may be added that his sympathy for the place in which the decorations appear has been shown by his asking the Rand School the smallest possible sum for his services. This sum has been provided by Mrs. Philip Lewisohn.

To the right and left of the stage Mr. Pogany has set panels containing in each case a nude figure. In one the "Mother of Man" stands with arms folded above her head, amid what the artist calls the fume and fermentation of earth. The tonal scheme is somber, almost livid, and recalls vaguely the mode of Franz Stück. In the other panel, devoted to the "Hope of Man," a woman, painted in a lighter key, against a golden background, represents aspiration toward freedom and salvation. To the right of the stage, on the long, unbroken wall, there has been placed a triptych representing three "regions" of the human soul, designated, respectively, "The Valley," "The Mountain" and "The Sea." In the first of these, groping figures, young and old, are placed in a landscape covered with flowers conventionally treated. Sensuous life is here depicted. In the third picture man as a creature of reasoning ambitions is swept up on the crest of an icy wave, a welter of forms surging above the watery mass. In the decorative design man is freed and reaches to an Alpine peak of sublime reality.

Mr. Pogany's symbolism is sufficiently recondite, and, even with the aid of inscriptions and a leaflet at which we have glanced, fails to carry quite the conviction at which he is driving. It is no disparagement of the intelligence presumed to prevail at the People's House to say that the artist might more effectively have spoken if he had adopted simpler, more popular terms. We wonder, too, if his argument would have lost anything if he had given more scope to the joy of life. No doubt these are strenuous times, and in a day of unrest bitter emotions come readily to the surface. Though Mr. Pogany is not precisely bitter, his cast of thought seems unduly grave. He fills the room with an atmosphere of painful struggle, the key of his color making it all the more oppressive. Still, we would not do him an injustice, or trench upon a subject which is outside our province, namely, the surroundings in which radicalism prefers to do its thinking Mr. Pogany is surely entitled to his own views on this subject. After all, the more important point for us is what he has done to add form and color to the character of a room.

He has done, to begin with, a piece of work with more force in it than we have hitherto associated with his art. In general he has attracted us by the sort of thing that looks well, in colors, on the cover of a magazine. He has been gayly decorative. Nothing in his art that we have seen has suggested a feeling for architecture. In collaborating now with the builder of a wall he has escaped stereotyped formulæ. The old familiar lay figure, enthroned in the middle of a canvas with cog wheels, jars and cupids balanced on either side, he has swept completely away. The nearest approach that he makes to formalism is suggested in the broad vertical bands of conventionalized pattern running from the top to the bottom of the right and left members of his triptych. These point to a desire to set a frame within his frame, to define boundaries by painted details emphasizing the straightness of the architectural inclosure. His aim, however, is not very happily realized. The bands in question irresistibly recall Eskimo totem poles. At the same time they are not too obtrusive, leaving the spectator untroubled in his apprehension of the main factors in the broad design. These are admirably handled. The two groups on the right and left are held in the right equilibrium, and the central panel, "The Mountain," artfully completes the whole pyramidal scheme. The triptych, in other words, is conceived as a whole and skillfully executed as such. It is an accomplished piece of painting. In his treatment of form Mr. Pogany is a trifle mannered, but he has a measure of strength, and there is grace besides in his firm and fluid line.

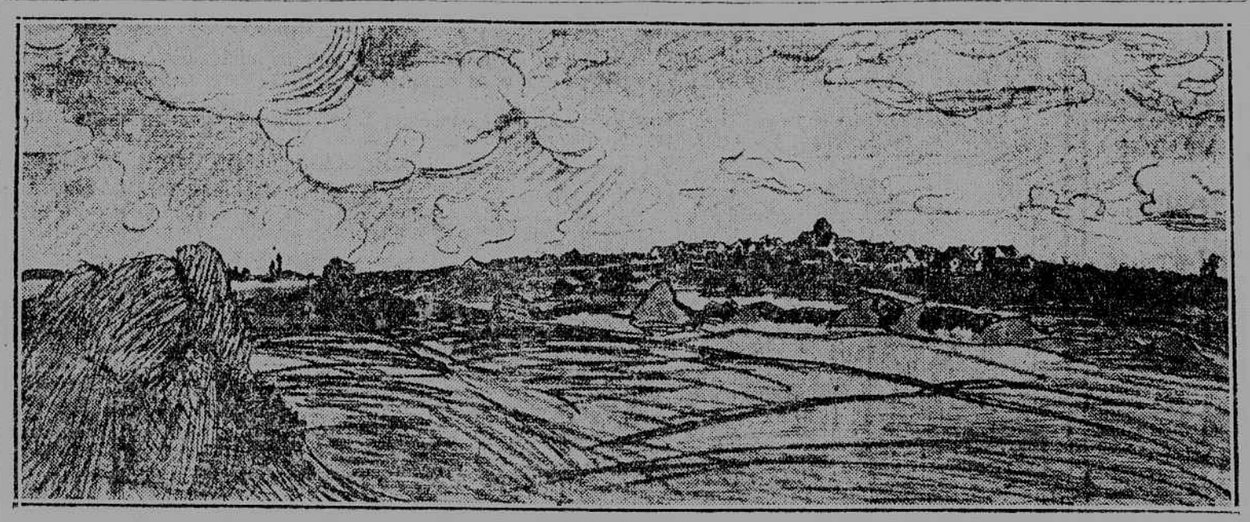
He might have proved not only accomplished but brilliant if he had achieved a richer and more luminous key of color. The livid tone to which we have already alluded is repeated too often throughout this cycle of paintings and his tendency to rather cold, flat tints is productive of especially disappointing results in his solid background. These need more transparent quality, they need more life, and, to put it frankly, more beauty. That is, to tell the truth, the omission which troubles us most in this ambitious and really interesting performance. It was a fine thing to have dreamed these dreams. The mere fact of their going on the walls of this auditorium is a cheering fact. Nothing could be more delightful than thus to bring the influence of art to bear upon the scene of so much political and kindred discussion. We are grateful to Mr. Pogany, and to the organization he has served, for a generous, high-minded gesture. But we wish also that he had contrived to invest his paintings with more of charm, with more of the delicate loveliness which we are sure would be compatible with his theme. Take, for example, the floral scene in the first member of his triptych. It might have been made truly the "flower-lit plain" of the poet without violating a single austere tenet of radicalism. The same observation applies to the linear pattern with which Mr. Pogany has filled out certain spaces in the room not given to pictorial motives. It is thin and cold where it ought to have been made really beguiling. Again, however, we draw back from the danger of dogmatizing. Possibly they don't want to be beguiled at the People's House. In any case the frequenters of that sanctuary are to be congratulated. For their benefit a fine work of sincerity has been wrought.

Two Painters

Recent Work by W. L. Lathrop and C. G. Voorhees

A sensation rarely enjoyed by lovers of art in New York may be had at the Rehn gallery. It is the sensation offered by Mr. W. L. Lathrop, a painter whose landscapes are too seldom seen. There used to be a time when one could count upon coming across a certain number of his works every winter. Then, for some reason or other, none would be forthcoming. Now that for the first time in years we behold a considerable collection of paintings from his hand we are struck not only by familiar merits but by an unexpected variety. There is a large picture here, "Lymeport Farm," which brings back the Lathrop of former years, the painter of extreme reserve, who fixed upon quiet harmony and gave us little else. It is a fine picture, but there is positive excitement in observing the canvases that surround it —"The Straight Road," with its powerful color; "The Sunny Road," in which a lighter, totally different note is struck; the paintings like "The Plowman" and "Lymeport Hill," in which molst, gray sky plays the leading part, and "The Brook," in which Mr. Lathrop is somewhat racier and more spontaneous than in anything of his which we have ever seen. His landscapes are full of truth, full of sentiment and atmosphere, and they contain great beauty of tone. Furthermore, they have design, the quality that springs only from a genuine instinct for pictorial form. There is an element of style in this painter's work. We have spoken of his variety on this occasion. Always his impressions have had a peculiar freshness and individuality.

At the Folsom Gallery there is a collection of recent landscapes by Mr. Clark G. Voorhees. It is, we believe, the first time that he has had a show of his own here, though he has not been a stranger in local exhibitions. He well justifies whatever assertiveness there is about an artist's filling a room by himself. He, too, like Mr. Lathrop, has variety. And he has qualities of his own, though several of the best things he exhibits suggest that he has been influenced by Mr. Willard Metcalf. In pictures like "Down the Lane," "The Twin Bridge" and "October Sunshine" he reminds us strongly of Mr. Metcalf's gamut of color and even of his touch. Yet this does not have the lifeless air of derivative work. There is authentic vitality in these paintings. "The Twin Bridge" is as crisp and sparkling as only an original talent could have made it, and presently we find Mr. Voorhees making excursions in which no memory of any external influence persists. We may cite, for example, the picture of an old gabled house called "Abandoned." We can imagine Twachtman's looking over the artist's shoulder as he painted the thing and speaking encouraging words. Nor would he have accused Mr. Voorhees of taking a leaf out of his book. We characterize it simply by saying that it is sympathetic to the Twatchtman tradition. This is, perhaps, another way of saying that Mr. Voorhees knows the value of light. His luminous pictures are his best, though there are some winter scenes here, involving heavy masses of tree forms, which are not by any means negligible. Altogether Mr. Voorhees is inspiriting. He has a genuine gift and paints pictures with which it would be pleasant to live.



LES GERBES
(From the etching by Steinlen at the Keppel gallery)

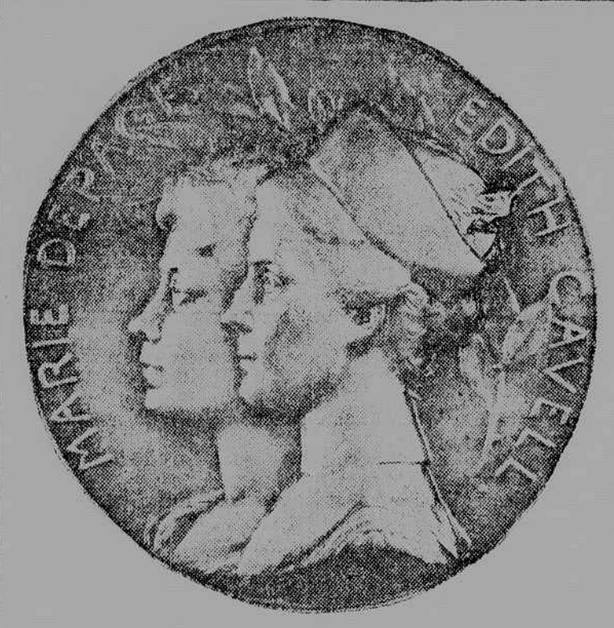
A Medal

In Memory of Edith Cavell and Marie Depage

Through the kindness of Dr. C. L. Gibson we have received one of the most beautiful war memorials thus far produced. It is a medal struck in bronze in honor of Edith Cavell and Marie Depage. It reproduces the medallion by Bonnetain, which has been placed in the Edith Cavell Training School for Nurses at Brussels. Dr. Antoine Depage had 5,000 copies of this medallion struck off to present to various persons who had helped him in his Red Cross work and the Belgian cause generally. Something like 800 of them are being distributed in this country, Dr. Gibson having been asked to undertake the distribution of half of them.

Dr. Depage's wife, it will be remembered, visited this country to raise funds for the Belgian Red Cross. She was one of those lost when the Lusitania was torpedoed. Not only in their tragic deaths were she and Miss Cavell placed among the heroines of the war. They both were valiant workers in the cause of the Allies, they both were women of burning souls who left the world better for the countless deeds of kindness they performed before the murderous hand of Germany took them out of it. They have been ideally commemorated in this bronze. Monuments are noble things, but a medal widely distributed carries a more intimate message. In this case, too, the purpose of the medal list is carried out with perfect tact. The two profiles are sculptured with the right touch, giving us unmistakably faithful portraiture. The names only are placed around them and on the other side we read simply: "1915. Remember!"

The world will remember, and those who possess this medal will draw from it a certain additional personal warmth. M. Bonnetain is a polished sculptor and a sympathetic interpreter. He has thoroughly humanized a fine work of art.



THE CAVELL-LEPAGE MEDAL
(From the bronze by Bonnetain)

Paris

Its Genius as Expressed in the Modern Print

It is frequently pointed out by the experienced observer of French manners, moved to rebuke the cynical reflections of students less instructed than himself, that Paris is not France. That is to say, the vicious life lying on the surface in the capital is by no means characteristic of the provinces. On the other hand, there is a sense in which Paris is most emphatically France, the sense in which the artistic genius of a nation is gathered up and expressed in a type. There is nothing on earth more intensely French than the art illustrated in an exhibition at the Keppel gallery, to be held all through the month of December. It is composed of modern prints, the prints of men like Manet and Degas, Forain and Steinlen, Pissarro and Toulouse-Lautrec. They sum up not only the traits of a place and an epoch, but, in a measure, the traits of a race.

There is a strong temptation to traverse this collection of about 200 etchings, lithographs and woodcuts purely from the point of view of the connoisseur, looking to questions of rarity and impressions. There are plates exhibited which have never been seen in this country before and prints of an incomparable perfection. But all the time in looking through them we have felt the compelling factor to be that which embodies states of mind. Here one may apprehend the outlook which a certain distinguished kind of French artist has upon life, here one may apprehend the very quintessence of the same stuff in which Balzac saturated himself, passed through temperaments akin to his. Truth was his guiding principle, truth mercilessly recorded. Where these artists part company from him is in the rigidly realistic direction given to their conceptions. In dramatizing his truth Balzac was not averse from obeying a romantic impulse. The artists let romance alone and only occasionally dip into drama. Forain is, perhaps, more richly endowed than any of the others in the imagination characteristic of their great literary prototype. Last spring, in surveying his career apropos of the paintings and drawings shown at the Kraushaar gallery, we mentioned his little known interest in Scriptural subjects. Some of these now appear in the Keppel show, offering a precious opportunity for the study of him in a strange mood. It is strange because one has to disengage the unquestionable spiritual force of the man from that ruthless realism which has always belonged to his art. One can see that he has felt the tragic beauty of Christ. One sees also how powerless this emotion has been to shake his habit as the mordant, almost callous draftsman. This, too, is very Parisian, very French.

Forain, with his imagination, his humanitarian poignancy, his cruel yet somehow elevated satire, brings us face to face with modern French graphic art in its broadest and most intellectual aspect. Steinlen and Toulouse-Lautrec interpret the soul of Montmartre. They initiate us particularly into a world obscured for most alien beholders by a factitious glamour. The American, watching the decadent movement of the music halls, the cafés and the streets, is sometimes captured by its blitheness and its color. He senses the seamy side without gathering its full import. There is no glamour in the Paris of the two Frenchmen just cited. They know what is hard and battered in their world and reproduce it with unflinching fidelity. Toulouse-Lautrec is the more sharply sophisticated of the two. His art bites like some deadly acid. Steinlen has more heart, a quicker and more searching sympathy for the sorrows of the humble. Both men have the gift of style, the gift of technique surcharged with individuality. Steinlen was some time visited by vagrant impulses toward beauty. He had an extraordinary grasp of form and a rich flowing line that sometimes worked miracles. Looking at one of his etchings in this exhibition the "Retrour du Lavoir," in the rare first state, the drawing of one of the women carried us back for a moment to the figure seated in the foreground of "Las Hilanderas." There is, indeed, nothing incongruous about bracketing him with Velasquez. He occasionally had a flash of the Spaniard's largeness and power. He shows his breadth, by the way, when he turns from the figure to landscape. The soft-ground etching, "Les Gerbes," is a magnificent drawing.

Degas is the scientist of the group, the passionless observer dissecting the Parisian spectacle in a kind of dry light, pursuing neither beauty nor ugliness, but registering both with a kind of detached virtuosity, wrenching a masterly and wonderfully personalized technique upon problems of form. He, like Forain, is represented in the show by some rare pieces. Manet looms appropriately beside him, but there is a decisive transition made from the one to the other. Though the Parisian spirit crops out in Manet it is interesting to observe how, with him, the atmosphere reverts to Velasquez and Goya. In him the painter gleams through the etcher and we think as much of Spain as of France. Goya, it may be noted in passing, is included at the Keppel gallery, an absorbing type, though not indispensable to the harmony of the present display. He is important to it chiefly as a historical influence. Carrière is abundantly welcome, as belonging to the period and as touched, psychologically, by the same Parisian pressures which count so heavily with the others. His "Paul Verlaine" is a glorious production, both as portrait and as lithograph. Pissarro is one of the most important figures in the whole company. His is the pastoral as distinguished from the urban motive. In contrast to the Metropolitan flair of Forain or Steinlen he seems almost naive. Pissarro sought and secured what his colleagues so often neglected, the tender beauty of nature.

Is Paris, indeed, not France? It is, at all events, a cosmos by itself. Besides the individualities we have mentioned, this exhibition embraces the mysticism of Redon. Thus the collection comes full circle, so to say.

(Continued on next page)

THE SEA
(From the mural painting by Willy Pogany in the auditorium of the People's House)